

Are guns used more by US civilians for self-defense or for intimidation?

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OBJECTIVES

To determine the relative incidence of gun victimization versus self-defense gun use by civilians in the United States, as well as the circumstances and probable legality of the self-defense uses.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

Two national, random-digit dial-telephone surveys of the adult population were conducted in 1996 and 1999, respectively. These Harvard surveys appear unique among private surveys for asking both open-ended questions about defensive gun use incidents and detailed questions about gun victimization and self-defense gun use. Five criminal court judges were asked to rate the probable legality of the self-reported defensive gun uses.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Even after many of the firearm victimization reports were excluded, the data show that more survey respondents report having been threatened or intimidated with a gun than having used a gun for self-protection. Most judges rated the reported self-defense gun uses as probably illegal in most cases, even assuming that the respondent had a permit to own and carry the gun and that the respondent had described the event honestly.

Guns are used to threaten and intimidate more often than they are used in self-defense. Most self-reported self-defense gun uses may be illegal and against the interests of society.